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Movies in the Classroom: Lessons for Curriculum Design

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Trailer

Public health is considered to be both a science and an art (Winslow, 1920; Faculty of Public Health, 2010), in which we seek to protect, improve and promote human health and enhance quality of life. It is a wide-ranging discipline, encompassing a broad mix of practitioners who work across a variety of organisational settings, and draws from science, technology, social sciences and law. Leadership, too, is often described as an art (Depree, 1989; Schein, 2005; Hodges, 2015) and as a field of study “draws on both the arts and the sciences” (Gill, 2006, p. 5). However, the word ‘art’ is frequently used indiscriminately and also ambiguously; it is a word that we often associate with the humanities, yet there has been relatively little discussion of how both public health and leadership, as subjects of study, are informed by the humanities. In what ways can the humanities, here largely defined as a collection of academic disciplines that include literature, drama and film, be used to enhance the learning of those practising, or seeking to practise, in the fields of public health and leadership?

There is a burgeoning body of literature (Johnson and Jackson 2005; Cornett, 2006; Jensen and Curtis, 2008; Smith, 2009; Edwards *et al*, 2015) which suggests that, by incorporating into our teaching the humanities, including film, we can enhance the learning experience of our students and help lay the foundations for greater sensitivity, understanding and empathy, as well as make the learning more ‘real’. In medicine, too, there has been growing interest in the use of the humanities to enhance medical training (Cassell, 1984; Sklar *et al*, 2002; Shapiro and Rucker, 2003; Blasco *et al*, 2005), with much of the literature suggesting that exposure can help make those who practise medicine more empathetic, understanding and thoughtful in their work. Why not, then, explore how this might be incorporated into the teaching of public health and leadership?

In this short paper, we reflect briefly on an initiative, developed in the Faculty of Education and Health at the University of Greenwich, in which cinema is used to supplement teaching and augment the learning of public health, wellbeing and leadership students. We look at one film in particular to demonstrate how it enhances traditional classroom-based teaching.

Pitching the Screenplay

Why cinema in particular? We live in an age in which film, television and other visual media predominate. Visual images take centre stage in the news, advertising, entertainment and even education. Students spend a significant amount of their time in front of the small or big screen and are therefore more responsive, it is argued, to audio-visual stimuli than traditional, written forms of communication (Spielberger and Lieberman, 1985). This poses a challenge in higher education, where most learning materials are still in written form. How then can we, as educators, make our teaching more meaningful and relevant, whilst developing students’ critical thinking skills? One possible strategy is to use carefully-selected feature films as part of the teaching and learning curriculum.

Over the last twenty or so years, educators across a wide range of disciplines - psychology, counselling, leadership, nursing, science, fine arts - have recognised the pedagogic value of films in teaching and learning (Tipton and Tiemann, 1993; Bluestone, 2000; Kuzma and Haney, 2001; Masters, 2005; Marcus and Stoddard, 2007; Capar, 2012; Gallagher, Wilson and Jaine, 2014). They are an excellent vehicle for illustrating course content and making sense of abstract theories and concepts (Hannay and Venne, 2012), whilst promoting critical thinking, stimulating the senses and engaging emotions. According to Champoux (1999), feature films have an audio-visual impact that gives them a distinct advantage over the printed or spoken word and “cinema's ability to create a unique experience gives it unbeatable power as a teaching tool” (p. 207).

Roll Camera ... Action!

At a learning, teaching and assessment conference held at the University of Greenwich in January 2015, the authors conducted a short workshop in which they shared with participants two approaches to using film to supplement teaching and enhance learning:

- The first involves use of an extra-curricular film club for BSc Public Health and BSc Health and Wellbeing students to introduce a range of contemporary public health and wellbeing issues in an entertaining way, as an adjunct to traditional teaching and learning. Although a voluntary activity, this club is well attended by students who value the opportunity to explore, in discussion after the film has been shown, themes relevant to public health and wellbeing. Films are usually selected by members of the course team, but suggestions from students are also encouraged.
- The second involves use of an eclectic mix of feature films to bring leadership theory to life as part of the mandatory taught element of two post-experience leadership courses. Students are asked to select a movie from a box of DVDs and watch it as homework in between lectures. However, the real task is to view the film through the lens of a number of different leadership theories and then to discuss the findings in class the following week.

Examples of some of the films used by the authors in their teaching were shown in two short video montages created for the workshop (see Table 1). Both videos have been uploaded to YouTube and can be accessed at the addresses shown below the table.

Table 1

Public Health and Wellbeing Films¹	Leadership Films²
Erin Brockovich (environmental contamination)	Erin Brockovich (situational leadership)
Contagion (epidemiology, communicable disease)	Invictus (leadership vision)
Dreams of a Life (ageing, loneliness, social capital)	Spartacus (followership)
Precious (abuse, social & structural determinants)	Alien (female leadership)
Desert Flower (FGM, emancipation)	Gladiator (leadership traits)
Still Alice (Alzheimer's disease, aging, identity)	Chicken Run (who can be a leader?)

¹. https://youtu.be/Qq0nSce_SzI

². <https://youtu.be/eATLUsCGnwQ>

During the workshop, participants were encouraged to reflect on their own teaching practice and identify films that might be used to support their own teaching and/or discipline. The authors shared best practice tips for both extra- and intra-curricular activity and introduced a simple framework (repurposed below as a list of questions) to guide the use of film in curriculum design:

- a. Why this film? Are other films more appropriate?
- b. What is your main objective in using this film?
- c. How does the film illustrate course content?
- d. What contemporary issue does the film highlight?
- e. What abstract ideas or theory will the film illuminate?
- f. How will the film be used to foster critical thinking?
- g. How does the film encourage empathy or greater sensitivity?
- h. In what way(s) will the film stimulate senses or engage emotions?
- i. How will you deal with sensitive issues raised by the film?
- j. How will you use the film? *E.g.* in full, clips, trailer, on YouTube, pause and discuss?
- k. Will the film be incorporated in the curriculum or made extra-curricular?
- l. How will the film be advertised? What assumptions will the students make?
- m. Have you checked and addressed any copyright issues?
- n. Will the film help make learning fun? If so, how?

Plot Summary

Space precludes a detailed examination of each of the films listed above, but let us focus on one to demonstrate its usefulness as a teaching aid and to address questions *a* to *f* above. Erin Brockovich is chosen as it works particularly well across both public health and leadership. The film is based on a true-life event, namely contamination of a water supply and inadvertent poisoning of local residents by a power company that had been dumping toxic, carcinogenic waste illegally. The film addresses how the problem arose and, indirectly, the crucial role of epidemiology in public health. In addition to dealing with matters such as environmental health policy and risks to community health, the film addresses issues of social justice, community action and ethics in public and environmental health. In fact, many of the courses on the BSc Public Health and BSc Health and Wellbeing programmes are represented in this film, making it an ideal, integrative vehicle for teaching and learning.

A similar claim can also be made for leadership teaching. The film raises important issues of unethical leadership and the failure of corporate governance when shareholders' interests take precedence over those of other stakeholders. The film also poses the question: Who can be a leader? Erin Brockovitch is not a leader at the beginning of the film, yet she becomes one. She is not just a lowly legal clerk who assumes the mantle of leadership – she is a *female* legal clerk and the fact she is an unemployed, single mother struggling to support her family challenges the stereotype that only men in positions of power can be leaders. The film can be viewed through the lens of many different theories, for example situational and contingency theories of leadership. The film is also about leadership style and the skills and behaviours required of effective leaders, such as how to influence others, how to deal with conflict, how to build trust and so on. As an adjunct to face-to-face tuition, this

film of two hours eleven minutes, watched by students in their own time, bolsters eight hours of classroom teaching.

Denouement

The process of delivering the workshop and reflection on participants' feedback reinforced the authors' belief that in order to enhance the learning of public health, wellbeing or leadership students, we need to develop in them, as future practitioners, their critical awareness and sensitivities. The goal is to create more thoughtful practitioners who will be able not only to perform more successfully academically, but also to operate across a broad range of contexts and organisational settings. Whether assuming the role of leader or working in the fields of public health and wellbeing, students will find themselves facing, across a variety of disciplines after graduation, complex or even "wicked" challenges (Rittel and Webber, 1973) for which there are no obvious solutions, responses or easy answers. We need practitioners who can see problems from multiple perspectives and distinguish between the particular and the general; we need practitioners who can get under the skin of complex problems and develop their own creative response to them. Both film and the humanities in general can help our students' understanding of and responses to the world around them, fostering greater critical acuity and thereby producing more rounded, holistic practitioners.

Overall, our experience of the workshop, together with the literature that we had reviewed, reaffirmed our conviction that films are an excellent vehicle for illustrating course content, focusing attention on a contemporary issue, stimulating senses, engaging emotion, fostering empathy, making sense of abstract ideas, promoting critical thinking and, above all, making learning fun! Many of us in higher education are already using film, literature and drama in lectures, seminars and extra-curricular activities, and referring students to wider learning opportunities that include cinema, novels, autobiographies and art exhibitions outside formal study. However, we need to continue to find new, imaginative ways to help stimulate and encourage increasingly flexible, ethical, authentic, creative and appropriate learning options for our students.

In conclusion, use of film both as part of and alongside an already busy curriculum brings with it synergy that may be difficult to realise through traditional modes of teaching. More importantly, it is about what works well in learning and teaching and why what we do matters. We argue that use of movies in the classroom has multiple pedagogic benefits and offers students a broader and more multifaceted range of opportunities to enhance their learning and development. We seek to encourage further debate about how we can enrich students' learning, firm in the belief that film can and should be a vital part of the lecturer's toolbox.

Out-take

For those readers who wish to use film as part of their teaching, "the performance of a literary, dramatic or musical work before an audience consisting of teachers and pupils at an educational establishment and other persons directly connected with the activities of the establishment ... is not a public performance for the purposes of infringement of copyright" (Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988).

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